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REAGAN SAYS U.S. IS HOLDING TALKS ON GULF'S DEFENSE

CONFERENCES WITH ALLIES

He Asserts Soviet Decision to Put New Subs Off Coasts Does Not Trouble Him

By STEVEN R. WEISMAN

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, May 22 — President Reagan said tonight that the United States was consulting with allies about the possibility of military aid to protect shipping in the Persian Gulf, but he said the possibility of direct intervention was "very slight."

In a news conference, Mr. Reagan also dismissed the talk of increased danger from the recently announced decision by the Soviet Union to place more nuclear missile submarines off the American coasts.

"If I thought there was some reason to be concerned about them, I wouldn't be sleeping in this house tonight," Mr. Reagan said of the submarines. He said the submarines had been "patrolling there for extended periods of time" and did not pose a particular threat to American security.

Appeal on Central America

On the subject of Central America, the President appealed for Congressional support for "all elements" of his program of military assistance to the area, including the aid to "freedom fighters" who are seeking the overthrow of the Government of Nicaragua.

In what was one of his most explicit references to what used to be referred to as "covert" aid to the Nicaraguan insurgents, he said, "We must support the democratic aspirations of the people of Nicaragua" to prevent the spread of Communism in the region.

The President's comments about the Persian Gulf came after a period of heightened tensions resulting from attacks on oil tankers in the area by both Iran and Iraq. The attacks were part of the widening war between the two countries.

Appeals for Help

Asked about reports that his Administration had assured Saudi Arabia of American willingness to help, Mr. Reagan said: "If they ask us for help, we have obviously, we've thought in terms of what we might do. But I don't think that's something I should talk about."

But when a questioner asked about the possibility that the United States would become involved in a "shooting war" in the area, he replied: "I think very slight. I can't foresee that happening."

The President opened the news conference with a statement appealing for his aid program for Central America, asserting that "the enemies of freedom" were watching Congress as it considers the package.

The assertions about the seriousness of the situation appeared to set the stage for a statement by Mr. Reagan to the effect that the world was safer as a result of his policies, contrary to rising criticisms by Democratic opponents in the Presidential campaign.

On domestic matters, President Reagan said that while he remained opposed to tax increases, he might have to review the tax structure "when we get to the absolute bottom of where we can get in Federal spending." "We're not anywhere near that," Mr. Reagan said. [Page A23.]

Asked if he felt his policies were responsible for Soviet hard-line policies — including Moscow's decision to withdraw from the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles this summer — Mr. Reagan said, "I don't think I'm responsible for those things."

He said that it was the Soviet Union, not the United States, that had walked away from the nuclear arms negotiating table in Geneva and then dismissed the suggestion that Moscow was "unhappy" about the deterioration of relations.

"They're unhappy because for the first time in a couple of decades we are preserving our security ability," he said. "We're building up our military and we're not unilaterally disarming while they continue their massive arms buildup."

He added: "I think the world maybe is a little safer than it has been in the past."

President Reagan was asked whether there were any circumstances under which the United States would act unilaterally in the Persian Gulf without waiting to be asked by one of the countries in the area.

'Thanks to Decontrol'

"I can't foresee that," he replied. He noted that of all the oil-importing nations, the United States would be the "least hurt by any shutdown," because "thanks to decontrol," only 3 percent of American oil supplies come from the Persian Gulf.

He said "we would not hold back" on using the United States's strategic reserve of oil to help American allies in the event of a Persian Gulf shutdown, but said there were no specific plans to do so.

He said that "neither we nor the West will stand by and see the Straits of Hormuz or the Persian Gulf closed to shipping."

The President was asked whether he had received any response from Saudi Arabia to reported offers from the United States to protect tankers passing through the Persian Gulf from attack by the Iranians or Iraqis.

Mr. Reagan responded that the reports were based on speculation, but he added, "We have kept in touch with the gulf states and our own allies." He said that the United States had not offered to intervene in the area and had not been asked to.

He said that if the gulf countries asked for assistance, the United States would listen to their requests.

'Blow Up the World'

The President, asked to explain why many people felt the world had moved closer to war, said no one sought peace more than he did. He said the perception that "I have an itchy finger and will blow up the world" was the fault of news organizations.

He said that after what he described as aggression by the Soviet Union and its allies in Afghanistan and Cambodia before his Administration, the Russians "have not taken another inch of territory since we have been here."

He also said the United States was not responsible for the Soviet withdrawal from the Olympic Games this summer, and he said the United States had assured the Soviet Union that its their athletes would be secure in Los Angeles.

Commenting on the stalled disarmament negotiations, Mr. Reagan said that the Russians "may be waiting for the elections to be over." He noted that Moscow had not succeeded in deterring the United States's European allies from accepting medium-range missiles and said that the Atlantic Alliance had never been stronger.

Mr. Reagan was asked how he could

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